

## Korea: First Century Church

Some time ago an enthusiastic visitor, impressed by the fervour and zeal and rapid growth of the church in Korea wrote back that he would be forever grateful for having been granted a glimpse of first-century Christianity in action, a twentieth-century Pentecost. I was pleased and gratified. But a little uneasy. I felt that perhaps I should write back and say that if he would read his Bible a little more deeply, and stay in Korea a little longer, I could show him how really like the first century church the church in Korea is.

I could show him, for example, that it is as divisive as the church in Rome, as disorderly as the church in Corinth, as stupidly legalistic as the church in Galatia, and as uncritically tolerant of open sin as the church in Thyatira. After all, those were first century churches, too, and the Bible neither shame-facely hides their weaknesses, nor glories over-much in their strengths.

Korea, I must confess has all the weaknesses, as well as all the strengths of those early Christians. Division, disorder, legalism and uncritical tolerance. There is a fearsome foursome, for you. Enough to kill any church. But before you give up the Korea for lost, remember that those same words described the church two thousand years ago, and it is not dead yet.

Rom. Phil. 1:15-17.

<sup>like Rome.</sup> Division, The Korean church has all of that it needs. In fact, for awhile, back in the 1950s, that is about all it did have. The "decade of division", we called it. Just about every major denomination, with the shining exception of our Salvation Army brethren, I think, was split in two, and usually in three or four. [I take no particular pride in the fact that in this particular race, Presbyterians led all the rest. We split fourteen different ways! Incredible. But Christians never give up hope for the Church of Jesus Christ,] and we are never to cease to love it.

I Cor. 11:2-21.

And disorder, like Corinth. I will never to my dying day forget the scene at the 44th General Assembly of our church, back in 1959 in Taejon, when Christian goon-squads, organized for the specific purpose of splitting the church, swept into the church sanctuary, attacked the delegates and broke up the meeting in complete chaos, driving out the legal members by beating them over the head with rubber shoes. Again, incredible. But again, Christians never give up hope for the Church of Jesus Christ, and we are never to cease to love it.

Gal. 3:1, 5:1

<sup>of legalistic</sup> And legalism. We have that rampant throughout Korean Christianity. And yet at the same time, we have an inconsistent, uncritical ethical tolerance of practices and evasions that would make a Sophist blush. Everybody knows that Christians don't smoke or drink in Korea. That is how some people tell Christians from non-Christians. Not by whether they tell the truth, and

resist corrupting bribes and stand up unafraid for justice and freedom. The most unbelievable case of this strange ambivalence I've ever come across--tragic if it weren't almost funny--was when I was president of a little Bible Institute down country, and the Dean, who later split from us because we were not orthodox enough, came to ask permission to expel two girls who had given themselves permanents against his regulations, while at the same time he asked forgiveness of two boys who had cheated on their Bible exam. What a mixture of inflexible legalism, and uncritical tolerance. Like Galatia and Thyatira!

Let me say it again. Christians never give up hope for the Church of Jesus Christ. *It had its problems way back in the golden days of the early church. It has its problems right here today in Korea. But that early church turned the wheel upside down by the Lord Jesus, and loves it. I feel when I am most discouraged - the Lord lifts me up again. It lets me see his church as he sees it - and loves it.*

There were times back in the 50s that I thought division and schism had finished us once and for all. I didn't realize that division is one of nature's ways of growing. Like cells. They split to grow. So also in Korea, the most disastrous division of all, one that cut us right down the middle, both sides are now as large as the whole church was before the split. And the number of Christians in Korea has doubled despite the decade of division. There are times when even in the face of tragic Christian schism--and division is tragic even when it stimulates growth--we must learn to say with Paul as he looked at the divisions in the Roman church and wrote to Philippi, "What does it matter? One way or another, in pretence or sincerity, Christ is set forth, and for that I rejoice". (Phil. 1: 18)

"Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, if it was to cleanse all its faults for better than you loved the church. So can you. Don't let the sustaining power of the love slip out of your mission."

And how about disorder? Disorder kills. Disease is disorder. But at the same time, disorder can be as much a sign of life as of weakness. Nothing is quite so coldly ordered as a corpse. Moreover, it is important to realize that disorder is relative. What looks like disorder to me, a spectator, can be pure joy to the participant. And the touch of throbbing Pentecostal joy in all the churches of Korea--not limited and scornfully segregated in officially Pentecostal churches,--has been one of the great, abiding secrets of the continuing vitality of Korean Christianity. "Quench not the Spirit," said Paul, and he was speaking of gifts of the Spirit that some called disorder, but Christ calls power.

I am quite aware that the most serious criticism of Korean Christianity is that its surface legalism hides an inner lack of ethical integrity. *Let me say a word about legalism first. After all, there are worse sins than self-righteous legalism. The one thing worse than a self-righteous Christian is a self-righteous sinner, a kind of inverted Pharisee whose delight in damning Christians for their pride in being good pushes them into a far worse trap, pride in being bad. At least the Korean church recognizes what some churches have forgotten: that the cure for legalism is not to throw away the law, and that though there is no salvation in the law, there is still law in the gospel.*

No, it is not legalism that is Korean Christianity's greatest ~~sin~~ weakness, but just the opposite, perhaps--lack of integrity and too great a tolerance of ethical lapses. And yet, every time I am saddened to hear it pointed out even Christians in high office